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SUBJECT: POLLSTER: VENEZUELAN LOVE CHAVEZ, BUT THEY DON'T
TRUST HIM

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBIN D. MEYER,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloffs met October 9 with Luis Vicente Leon, the director of the prominent Datanalisis polling firm, who shared his analysis of the results of his September poll. He distinguished between President Chavez's enduring personal popularity, hovering around 53 percent, and the decline in public confidence in Chavez, now at 42 percent. Leon noted that while inflation, labor issues, and the student movement are likely to be the greatest challenges for the Venezuelan government (GBRV) in the coming months, Chavez continues to control the levers that influence public opinion. Leon expressed doubt about the opposition's ability to take advantage of any downturn in Chavez's popularity because of its weak leadership, poor message control, limited grassroots reach, and lack of presence in rural areas, where 49 percent of the electorate live. Regarding the National Assembly (AN) elections widely anticipated in 2010, Leon said that opposition parties would fail if the balloting once again became a plebiscite on Chavez. End Summary.

EXPLAINING CHAVEZ'S ENDURING POPULARITY

¶2. (C) Leon began by describing the Chavez government as neither communist nor perfectly democratic, but rather as one of "permeable control." He noted that Chavez's series of electoral victories reflected his enduring popularity and discounted the opposition's repeated claims of electoral fraud, saying that election results had consistently been within a 3 percent margin of all pre-election polling by respected pollsters. However, Leon described the institutionalized advantages ("ventajismo") that have contributed to Chavez's electoral successes by shaping the pre-election environment, including Chavez's access to the media, his control of the electoral timetable, his use of government resources for populist programs, etc.

¶3. (C) Leon attributed some of Chavez's post-coup popularity to the "utilitarian," rather than ideological, relationship that he developed with poorer sectors through the "social missions" in the areas of health, literacy, housing, and education. Leon noted that this "utilitarian" relationship was, in fact, similar to the one that "Accion Democratica" had established with its base in the decades before Chavez's election in 1998. Because Chavez's support is not ideological -- large majorities oppose

nationalization of property, the closure of radio stations, and the "Cuban model" and hold in high regard the Catholic Church, private enterprise, banks, and businessmen -- Chavez must spend hours in mandatory "en cadena" broadcasts spinning his message. For example, Chavez must assure the public that a nationalization of an industry or the closure of a media outlet is being undertaken to break up a monopoly, for the benefit of oppressed workers, or to punish those who are corrupt or violating the law. Noting Venezuela's consumer culture, Leon wryly observed that Chavez is popular precisely because his base is consuming more as a result of his populist programs.

¶4. (C) As measured by a question asking respondents to evaluate the President's work for the well-being of the country, which Leon assessed as the question that best correlates to electoral success, Chavez's popularity is still between 53 and 57 percent. However, Leon highlighted what he considered the more important statistic -- the gap between Chavez's popularity and the level of public trust in him, which dropped following his 2007 decision to close Radio Caracas TV (RCTV) and which now stands at about 42 percent. To explain this gap between popularity and trust, Leon joked that a Venezuelan may say "I love my husband, but I don't trust him." Leon concluded that this gap could favor Chavez if he were able to make the 2010 AN elections a plebiscite on his rule, but could reduce the impact of his endorsements of PSUV candidates, which rely on public trust rather than personal popularity for their effect.

CHALLENGING CHAVEZ'S POPULARITY: INFLATION, STUDENTS, AND LABOR

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¶5. (C) Leon listed inflation, student protests, and labor unrest as potential obstacles for Chavez in the coming months. Growing inflation could prove the biggest threat and would likely lead Chavez to drastically increase public spending in the last quarter of the year with the anticipated rise in oil prices. In trying to implement aspects of the education law that diminish university autonomy, Chavez may face an increasingly aggressive student response that could escalate out of control. Ongoing conflicts between the central government and unions could worsen, particularly now that the government owned some of the major industries, leading Leon to ask, "How much more time until things explode?"

¶6. (C) Despite his poll showing that almost 60 percent of respondents ranked crime ("inseguridad") as the biggest problem facing the country (with inflation/high cost of living a distant second at 13 percent), Leon downplayed the deleterious effect the crime rate would have on Chavez's popularity. Leon explained that the Venezuelan poor have always had to endure crime and do not hold Chavez responsible. According to Leon, Chavez does not want to develop anti-crime programs because to do so would make him responsible for solving this intractable problem. He also suggested that the population's concerns over crime diverted its attention from other problems facing the country.

GROWING "NI-NI" SECTOR

¶7. (C) Leon commented on the weakness of the opposition, assessing that "I see no future without strengthened parties." According to his September polling, only about 40 percent of the total population identifies with a political party or movement, of whom about 30 percent

identify with the PSUV and 10 percent with one of the opposition parties. When all respondents were asked whom they would vote for if presidential elections were held today, about 30 percent listed Chavez, 10 percent listed one of the opposition figures, and 40 percent did not know. However, when asked about the National Assembly elections, the same 30 percent said they would support Chavez's candidates, but almost 30 percent said they would support "independent" candidates and about 20 percent said they would support opposition candidates.

18. (C) Leon cited the high levels of personal well-being among all sectors of society as a factor dampening opposition to Chavez. According to his September poll, among the "independent" ("ni-ni") sector, almost 72 percent reported a positive personal situation. Even 53 percent of people who identified with the opposition rated their personal situation as positive. Leon noted that his private sector clients who most oppose Chavez were earning more than ever before from their businesses here.

19. (C) Leon said that the opposition had failed to effectively use the three factors essential to public opinion -- the media, the message, and the messenger -- to expand its base of public support. When the opposition controlled the media five years ago, they so closely identified with the opposition that they brought on a government backlash. Moreover, they relied on their control of the media to get out their message rather than engage in grassroots organizing. Chavez, in contrast, uses the media to reinforce the message that his base receives daily through the social missions. As for its message, Leon criticized the opposition for failing to make the link between Chavez and the problems that people face. He also faulted the opposition for "speaking to mirrors" by crafting messages that only appeal to those who already oppose Chavez. Leon cited the new education law as an example: rather than focusing on access to primary education, the basic concern of the poor, the opposition message focused on the new law's technical and legal implications for university-level education, a concern that only resonated with the middle- and upper-classes. Lastly, Leon emphasized that the opposition lacks a unifying leader who can transmit its message to the Venezuelan people. He assessed that Leopoldo Lopez was probably hoping to catapult himself into that type of leadership role with his "popular networks" ("redes populares") initiative.

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MAKING NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS A PLEBESCITE ON CHAVEZ

110. (C) Looking ahead to AN elections, Leon warned that the opposition would lose if it fell into the same pattern as previous elections and made the vote a battle between Chavismo and the opposition. He said that with 55 percent of the votes, the new electoral law could allow Chavez to win at least 68 percent of the seats. Leon pointed out that 51 percent of Venezuela's population lives in urban areas, where the opposition is strong, but that the opposition is virtually nonexistent in rural regions where the other 49 percent of the electoral lives. Leon agreed with the suggestion that the opposition's best chance for success in the AN elections would come with a focus on local issues and concerns.

COMMENT

111. (C) Leon, who has clients in the GBRV, the opposition, and the private sector, suggested that the 2010 elections were not a done deal for either side. Although the playing field is tilted to favor Chavez, the GBRV also

faces significant potential challenges in the coming months. While Leon's polling suggests that the PSUV could win a two-thirds majority of the seats in the AN, that is still a far cry from the PSUV's current control of all but a handful of seats. End Comment.
DUDDY